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ABSTRACT

Intrinsic justification in academic debate focuses on the essential characteristics of the terms in a topic. The technique, advocated by Ken Bahm, works with very few Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA) topics. It gives rise to counterwarrants, which create more confusion than clarity, while its counterplans destroy affirmative grounds. In addition, intrinsicness does not achieve its objective of increasing clash over the whole resolution approach. Intrinsic justification fails in CEDA debate because very few recent CEDA topics work as non-contextualized statements. Intrinsic counterplans and counterwarrants fail because they do not make arguments as they normally do in policy debate or help test what is essential to a topic. Furthermore, there is neither the time nor the dialogic process necessary to use counterplans and counterwarrants to test intrinsicness in debate. Instead of an intrinsic approach, CEDA should maintain a contextual one. A contextual approach interprets a resolution as it is manifested in contemporary society, and can be applied to any topic. The approach promotes clash and clarity, and does not fall to the whims of whatever the affirmative chooses as reasonable. Intrinsic justification is highly problematic; without any rationale for its use in value or policy debate, it should be rejected. (SG)

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The Essentials of Interpreting the Resolution: A CONTEXTUAL APPROACH LIMITED BY SIX TESTS instead of Counterplans and Counterwarrants

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Ken Bahm's article "Intrinsic Justification: Meaning and Method," takes an innovative and controversial approach to the wholistic and inductive interpretation of debate topics. Bahm's innovation is his advocacy that debate focus on the essential characteristics of the terms in the topic. Ken's argument is that debaters and judges should interpret topics as "temporally unbounded" and "invariant" as opposed to contextually where the topic is applied to specific or general actions and beliefs ongoing in society. So, for example, topics like "Resolved: That United States covert involvement in Central America would be undesirable" would not call for affirmative arguments about the contras or our arms deals with the right wing in Guatemala and El Salvador. Rather, affirmatives would need to focus on what is intrinsic to covert involvement. Bahm argues that affirmatives could argue that ". . . secrecy is an intrinsic feature of covert involvement."[1] The affirmative case would need to address the undesirability of secrecy as opposed to the undesirability of C.I.A. activity in Guatemala and other such specific application of the topic. By requiring debaters to focus on the essential characteristics, Ken hopes to improve clash in debate over the wholistic and inductive approach.

The controversy with Ken's approach rests on the effects of its application to academic debate. Bill Hill and Richard W. Leeman have recently argued that the phenomenological approach underlying intrinsicness is not suited for the purposes of academic debate, that identifying essential and contingent properties is problematic, and that intrinsicness arguments harm the debate process.[2] Matt Taylor makes a very good case that intrinsicness ignores the inherent contextuality of language, makes words meaningless as well as ignores important contemporary issues.[3]

I want to add my voice on the issue of intrinsicness. In my paper, I argue that 1) intrinsic interpretation works with very few C.E.D.A. topics; 2) counterwarrants create more confusion than clarity; 3) counterplans destruct affirmative ground; and 4) the practice of intrinsicness does not achieve its objective of increasing clash over the whole resolution approach. Instead, I urge that we use a "contextual" approach to the topic limited by six tests. The contextual approach is applicable to all topics, makes affirmative and negative ground clear, and encourages clash.

The Limited Use of an Intrinsic Interpretation of the Topic

From the start, the intrinsic approach is limited in that it is applicable to very few resolutions. Very few of the recent C.E.D.A. topics would work as non-contextualized statements. Ken, himself, has told me that an intrinsic approach to this fall's topic will not work. I agree but I see no difference between it and previous

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1. Kenneth Bahm, "Intrinsic Justification: Meaning and Method," CEDA Yearbook 9 (1988) 24.
2. Bill Hill and Richard W. Leeman, "On Not Using Intrinsic Justification in Debate," Argumentation and Advocacy 26 (Spring 1990): 133 - 144.
3. Matthew Taylor, "Intrinsicness: A Postmodern Critique," Paper presentation to the Cross Examination Debate Association at the 1991 Speech Communication Association Convention.

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C.E.D.A. topics.[4] With two and perhaps three exceptions, every topic over the past five years is worded to explicitly refer to evaluations of present actions. The U.N., free press, handgun, and terrorism topics all refer to specific ongoing actions. I think the same thing of the covert involvement and drug testing topics which Ken specifically mentions in his article. The covert involvement topic specifies that it be "United States" covert involvement--not involvement in the abstract. The drug testing topic asks whether "regulations in the United States requiring employees to be tested" are an unwarranted invasion of privacy or not. The topic is situationally bounded. It calls for discussion of regulations in the United States meaning "within the limits or boundaries"[5] of our nation and it says "are" meaning the "present tense indicative."[6] The only exceptions that I see are the "military support to non-democratic governments" and "violence as a response to oppression" and perhaps the "third parties" topics. These topics can be interpreted with greater ease from an intrinsic perspective because they do not explicitly refer to any actions currently occuring.[7]

However, even though we can more easily interpret these topics from an intrinsic perspective, we should neither force nor presume that affirmatives should defend such topics from an intrinsic approach. Affirmatives could choose to do so or they could just as justifiably contextualize the topics. Given that affirmatives do not gain very much by intrinsically interpreting the topic and usually stand to lose a great deal (as I will demonstrate), they will not be likely to choose such a strategy. Without a strong justification for the intrinsic approach over alternative approaches, which Ken has as of yet not offered,[8] negatives do not stand on very solid ground in advocating an intrinsic approach. The result is that, from a theoretical standpoint, intrinsicness has very limited use at this point because the side that can choose to use it, the affirmative, has little strategic reason to do so, and the negative that does have reason to use it, has no theoretical rationale to do so.

Intrinsic Counterwarrants and Counterplans fail to meet their Objective

Even assuming that a team argues in favor of an intrinsic approach, there are still further limitations. Intrinsic counterplans and counterwarrants do not achieve their objective. They do not improve the debate process nor do they improve how we would go about interpreting the topic. To understand why this is so, we need to make very clear that intrinsic counterplans and counterwarrants sole objective can only be to clarify what is and what is not relevant in a debate. Intrinsic counterplans and counterwarrants do not make arguments as they normally do in policy debate nor do they help "test" what is and is not essential to the topic as Ken claims in his article.[9] Rather, they assume what is and what is not essential based on definitions of the terms in the topic. Counterplans and counterwarrants cannot go beyond this objective because, as Hill and Leeman have pointed out, there is neither the time nor the kind of dialogic process necessary to use counterplans and counterwarrants as exploratory devices for testing intrinsicness in a debate.[10] In this limited clarification role, neither counterplans nor counterwarrants achieve their objective.

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4. I should add that I cannot conceive of a policy resolution where the intrinsic position would work. Actions advocated by affirmatives will inevitably require some degree of concrete contextualization even if the affirmative wishes to support a broad policy devoted to some overarching principle. Such a policy will need to be enacted as a panel, commission, or explicitly stated law.
5. The American Heritage Dictionary (New York, New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1983).
6. The American.
7. The topics, specifically, are: "Resolved: That the United States is justified in providing military support to nondemocratic governments" and "Resolved: That violence is a justified response to political oppression."
8. Ken has not justified the use of an intrinsic approach over an approach using existing institutions and beliefs other than to refer to Jeffrey Bile's wholism article. The intrinsic approach does not achieve the benefits of "wholism" that Bile cites since it does not take a wholism approach. Hence, at this point, Ken has only offered his approach as a refinement of the inductive approach and has not justified its use nor why it is the way that affirmatives must (as opposed to "may") interpret the topic.
9. See page 27 - 28.
10. Hill and Leeman, "On Not" 138 - 139.

Counterwarrants do not Clarify--they Confuse

The use of intrinsic counterwarrants will do nothing but create greater confusion. Such counterwarrants just invest the negative with the power to do what they claim the affirmative cannot do. Say, for example, that the affirmative argues that the contras are a concealed, hidden action. Then, the negative argues that secret negotiation missions to El Salvador (a counterwarrant) worked. How does the negative argument either prove that secret negotiations are intrinsic or that aid to the contras is not intrinsic to the topic? They do not nor can they. Counterwarrants are an alternative instance of the resolution not included in the affirmative example and hence must be contextualized and not directly related to the affirmative examples. If the negative uses imagined counterwarrant examples, then they are counterplanning under the counterwarrant label. If they use counterwarrants that directly relate to the affirmative example, then they are making standard case attacks. Real counterwarrants will just provide another contextualized example that will confuse the debate.

Counterplans will leave no clear affirmative ground

Intrinsic counterplans offer a more initially appealing stance. They will clarify--although I tend to think that a mere statement that "this harm does not stem from the resolution because they do not link to the essential characteristics of the topic" would suffice. However intially appealing for their clarification capabilites, counterplans are still highly problematic. They ultimately leave the affirmative with no ground because they allow negatives to counterplan the affirmative away. Take for example, the drug testing topic, "Resolved: that regulations in the United States requiring employees to be tested for controlled substances are an unwarranted invasion of privacy." The negative could advance a counterplan mandating virtually 100% accurate gas chromotography testing required only of those employees who wished to be tested, with no test results resulting in firing nor release of confidential information. The affirmative cannot present a case that will defeat this counterplan. Choose a different topic, and I believe clever negatives will figure a way to make virtually any affirmative advocacy impossible. And Ken offers no way to prevent negatives from cutting and cutting into affirmative ground until they have no ground left nor do I think that he can.

Intrinsicness does not improve clash

Even if the negative does not abuse their counterplanning privilege, intrinsicness still will not improve clash. Consider Ken's attempt to justify intrinsicness to correct the following problem:

> Many rounds found the affirmative arguing that drug testing without due process for the purpose of firing workers is bad, while the negatives argued that drug testing, with due process for the purpose of rehabilitating workers is good.11

I agree with Ken that this is a problem--but I do not see how the intrinsic approach will solve this problem. I assume that the negative would make just such an argument to show that the affirmative is not intrinsic. Affirmatives and negatives would then spend vast amounts of time arguing the merits of an intrinsicness approach, identifying what is and is not intrinsic, arguing over whether firing workers and due process are intrinsic results of drug testing as an essentially defined term, all the while maintaining the same positions that Ken laments as not being in clash with each other.

In addition, clash will be damaged even if the affirmative concedes that the negative can argue in favor of an intrinsic interpretation of the topic. This is because teams can support and reject different aspects of the essential characteristics. Virtually any term has multiple "essential" characteristics. Witness Ken's comment that apples have "seeds, stem, skin structure, etc." and that covert involvement involves "secrecy, deception, and probably a lack of democratic accountability".[12] The negative can still avoid clash with the affirmative by debating just one characteristic while the affirmative debates a different characteristic. So, you would have affirmatives arguing that deception is bad while negatives argued that secrecy is good.

A Contextual Approach to Topicality

Instead of the troublesome and limited usefulness of an intrinsic approach, I urge that we maintain a contextual approach. A contextual approach is what we have been doing in C.E.D.A. for the most part, particularly with the parametric approach, and what we have been doing in N.D.T. for many years. A contextual approach would interpret the resolution as it is manifested in contemporary society.

The contextual approach can be applied to any topic (just try to think of one where it will not work), clarify what the affirmative and negative ground is with ease, and encourage clash. Take the drug testing topic--a

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11. Bahm, "Intrinsic," 24.
12. Bahm, "Intrinsic," 27.

contextual approach would resolve the previously discussed lack of clash: Simply decide to what degree current testing involves due process and rehabilitation as opposed to firing and then identify arguments in favor and against the current method of testing. Debaters who agree to use the contextualized focus would be just as clear about their roles on how to clash in this situation--the affirmative must reject current drug testing and the negative must support current drug testing. The negative could not counterplan the affirmative ground away nor could they avoid clash by focusing on only one aspect of the meaning of the topic. The affirmative ground would be how the resolution manifests itself in specific or general ways in our society. The negative ground would be to reject the affirmative position.

In addition, a contextual approach need not fall to the whims of whatever the affirmative chooses as reasonable. I do believe restraints need to be placed on affirmatives who make arguments about existing social and political conditions. I suggest that we use the following six tests to determine the reasonableness of an affirmative contextual interpretation:

1. Does the topic make sense using the interpretation?

If replacing a term in the topic with the words used in the definition make the topic nonsensical, then the definition should be rejected.

2. Would any group of people use the term in the way the interpretation advocates.

If no other group of people would conceivably use the affirmative interpretation, the interpretation should be rejected as contrived and without merit for debate.

3. Are the assumptions of the interpretation good or bad?

If the meaning given to a term is contradictory, implies bigotry, etc., it should be rejected in favor of an alternative interpretation that avoids such implications.

4. Does the interpretation give both sides ground to debate?

Any interpretation which prevents the affirmative or the negative from debating should be rejected. For example, some bidirectional interpretations erode negative ground so much that debate cannot occur because any argument that the negative advances are affirmative arguments according to the interpretation. Intrinsicness arguments ought be rejected for just this reason.

5. Does the interpretation make specific negative research impossible?

Affirmatives can choose to advocate examples of the topic as a means of affirming the topic--but that does not mean that they should be able to choose miniscule examples for which negatives could never prepare. If the affirmative chooses a small example that would make it impossible for the negative to prepare adequately because they would need to research hundreds of other similar small cases, the affirmative example should be rejected.

6. Is the affirmative interpretation consistent with the claims that the affirmative makes in their case?

If the arguments in the affirmative case link to a different interpretation, then they are irrelevant.

These six tests will prevent affirmatives from engaging in the kinds of practices that have given "parametrics" a bad name while at the same time avoiding the excesses of an intrinsic approach to the topic.

Conclusion

The contextual approach is superior to the intrinsic approach because it applies to a wide variety of topics, clarifies affirmative and negative ground, and encourages clash. Given these advantages, and that the intrinsic approach abstracts the topic out of contemporary issues that confront us (like the release of confidential drug information and aid to the contras), I believe Ken needs to do what he has not done yet: justify the intrinsic approach over competing interpretive approaches. As it stands, I believe the intrinsic approach is highly problematic and without any rationale for its use in value or policy debate, it should be rejected.